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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000651

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOF WELCOMES MARONITE PATRIARCH VISIT TO PARIS;
SEEKS TO HIGHLIGHT LEBANON AS NEXT BIG REGIONAL ELECTION

REF: BEIRUT 282 (EXDIS NOTAL)

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The GoF continued high-profile outreach to Lebanon's opposition with the January 28-29 visit to Paris of Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, who met with President Chirac and FM Barnier and had a historic, private meeting with Paris-based Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun. Chirac stressed to Sfeir the urgent need for Lebanon's opposition to remain united. MFA contacts described Sfeir as cautious and pessimistic on the state of Lebanon in his meeting with Barnier. Sfeir stressed the need to avoid a rupture between Lebanon and Syria and questioned what means existed to enforce UNSCR 1559. French officials described Sfeir as partly satisfied with the new Lebanese electoral law, which favors Christians. At the same time, Sfeir asserted that some 400,000 Syrians had become Lebanese citizens and would vote in villages where they would seek to turn the outcome in Syria's favor. French officials expressed concern that Syria is seeking to facilitate former General Aoun's return to Lebanon in order to further fracture Lebanon's opposition; Presidency contacts appeared reassured that Aoun would work with the opposition, despite his past destabilizing role in Lebanon. French officials added that UNSYG Representative Terje Roed-Larsen's upcoming visit to Damascus and Beirut would be important in maintaining pressure for 1559 implementation; Chirac will seek a meeting with Larsen in Paris upon his return from the region. Summing up on next steps, Presidency officials stressed that Chirac would like to inscribe Lebanon's spring elections within the context of growing democratization in the region, as a follow-up to elections in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq; Chirac reportedly will stress this point during his meeting with President Bush later this month. End summary.

SFEIR MEETINGS WITH CHIRAC, BARNIER

2. (C) Poloff discussed the January 28-29 visit to Paris of Maronite Patriarch Sfeir and next steps on Lebanon/Syria with Presidency Technical Advisor on the Middle East/Americas Dominique Boche February 2 with MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant Christian Jouret February 1. Jouret reported that Sfeir had a 30-minute one-on-one meeting with Chirac January 28, followed by a lunch in Sfeir's honor with other French officials present. The Patriarch met later that day for 45 minutes with FM Barnier, and had a private meeting with exiled General Michel Aoun in Paris January 29. Boche confirmed that Chirac's main message to Sfeir was the need for Lebanon's opposition to remain united; Chirac also asked the Patriarch to use his "moral authority" to help discourage rivalries among Christian politicians or between Christians and other elements of the opposition. (Note: Jouret told us that neither he or his boss, MFA A/S-equivalent for Middle East/North Africa Jean-Francois Thibault, had received a readout of the Chirac-Sfeir one-on-one discussion, but he speculated that Chirac's message was along the same lines described by Boche. End note.)

3. (C) On the Barnier-Sfeir discussion, Jouret reported that the Patriarch expressed deep pessimism on Lebanon's current situation and showed caution in discussing Syria, which he referred to continually as "the neighbor" rather than mentioning Damascus directly. Sfeir described a somber political and economic climate in Lebanon, where most educated youth, Christian and non-Christian, were emigrating to France and the U.S., amid a sharp decline in the Christian population in the Middle East in general. Sfeir asserted that some 40,000 Christians had fled Iraq for Syria, while the Palestinian Christian population, due to emigration, had dwindled to 10,000, from an earlier level of 100,000. Sfeir concluded that Lebanon was "losing control of itself," with social divisions growing between the rich and the poor. Sfeir was also cautious with Barnier on UNSCR 1559, which he described as a "good text," while questioning whether enforcement means existed. Sfeir cautioned that pressure on Syria should be exercised with great care and precision; he warned against provoking a rupture between Syria and Lebanon, which would leave Lebanon in a very dangerous condition. Sfeir stressed that he hoped for normal, egalitarian relations with Syria; he described Lebanon's pro-Syrian politicians as having no love for Syria, but pursuing their

own economic interests instead.

14. (C) On Lebanon's upcoming parliamentary elections, Jouret described Sfeir as partly satisfied with the new draft electoral law, in that the "kaza" district system favored Christians, everywhere except Beirut. At the same time, Sfeir warned Barnier that some 400,000 Syrians had become Lebanese citizens and would vote in the upcoming elections; he warned these Syrian/Lebanese would vote in villages where their turnout could turn the vote in Syria's favor. Asked for GoF views on the draft electoral law, Jouret described it as "not bad," and affirmed that as long as Lebanon's government remained confessionally based, smaller electoral districts based on the "kaza" system made sense. At the same time, it was clear the draft electoral law, by dividing Beirut into three districts, was designed to weaken Hariri, who was now viewed as the enemy by Syria and the GOL.

AOUN FACTOR

15. (C) Jouret described Sfeir's January 29 meeting with Aoun as historic and the first encounter between the two since the Lebanese civil war. Expressing personal views, Jouret said he was uncertain whether Aoun would return to Lebanon, as recent press reports have suggested, given that Syrian-initiated overtures could amount to a massive trap. Presidency advisor Boche appeared more convinced that an Aoun return was imminent, confirming that the GoF had been in discreet contact with the General, who appeared confident that the judicial obstacles to his return to Lebanon would be lifted. Boche conceded that the GoF had been struck by the sudden Lebanese announcement that Aoun's return would be welcomed, which suggested a Syrian attempt to further fracture the opposition, by putting one more figure in the mix. At the same time, Boche suggested that the GoF was reassured by Aoun's assurances that he would work with the opposition and not be the factor of division he was 15 years ago.

LARSEN VISIT

16. (C) Boche stressed that the upcoming visit of UNSYG Representative Terje Roed-Larsen to Beirut and Damascus would be an important opportunity to stress the international community's determination on UNSCR 1559 implementation. The GoF had wanted Larsen's visit to take place sooner, and wanted Larsen to set up a mechanism of regular visits, or a presence on the ground, to keep the pressure on in advance of the April SYG report on 1559 implementation. The Presidency was seeking to arrange a Larsen-Chirac meeting, which would likely take place upon Larsen's return from the region, some time next week.

LEBANON AS THE NEXT BIG ELECTION

17. (C) Summing up, Boche asserted that a new dynamic had begun to appear on UNSCR 1559 implementation, with the Lebanese opposition sensing that they had the support of the international community behind them, and thereby showing greater confidence in rejecting a permanent Syrian presence in Lebanon. At the same time, Syria appeared to be reacting to pressure, through such measures as the elevation of Deputy FM Walid Muallem, about which the GoF still remained skeptical. With the momentum of successful elections in Afghanistan, Palestine, and now Iraq, President Chirac wanted to inscribe Lebanon's spring elections within the context of growing democratization throughout the region. Boche noted that President Chirac had sought to highlight this point in his January 31 conversation with President Bush, and that Chirac would seek to expand upon the idea during his working dinner with the President in Brussels February 21.

COMMENT

18. (C) Although the GoF maintains that the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Iraq are the most pressing regional issues before us, Syria/Lebanon remains the regional issue in which President Chirac is most personally implicated. Any new gestures that we make to further promote our agenda for democracy and freedom in Lebanon -- as so eloquently proposed in Beirut 282 -- would be very well-received by the French and would be well-timed to coincide with upcoming high-level meetings with GoF leaders. End comment.